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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001899

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR  
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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER KDEM LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: TRYING TO MAKE A SLEIMAN PRESIDENCY WORK

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

**¶1.** (S) Despite the backing of Saad Hariri, Fouad Siniora, Walid Jumblatt, and -- less enthusiastically -- Samir Geagea, Michel Sleiman does not yet have his six-year lease on the Baabda Presidential Palace locked in. Just as Hariri et al. had hoped, March 14's backing of Sleiman caught Hizballah and Michel Aoun off guard. Hizballah leaders hint that the Siniora cabinet, illegitimate in their eyes, has no legal authority to propose the constitutional amendment to permit Sleiman's election. Syria's allies may be holding out for concessions regarding the cabinet and cabinet program, or they may be seeking clever ways to block Sleiman entirely. So a Sleiman presidency is far from inevitable.

Nevertheless, given that we are unable to answer the March 14 question -- "how can we elect Nassib Lahoud?" (given the lack of domestic and international support for an absolute majority election) -- Sleiman's candidacy is a possibility -- the most likely possibility currently under consideration -- we need to consider seriously.

**¶2.** (S) We are not enthusiastic about a Sleiman presidency. But in the spirit of our vow not to play the "name game" and to leave the presidential choice to the majority of MPs, we do not see any plausible way to, or benefit of, attempting a "veto" that would -- besides violating our principles the Lebanese being in charge -- likely fail, make us the spoilers, and turn the LAF against us. We also don't want to provide the pretext by which March 8 can block Sleiman while blaming us for the perpetuation of the presidential vacuum and whatever chaos follows. It is time, instead, to contemplate how we make the Sleiman presidency, if it happens, work as well as possible. Played right -- which is how March 14 is trying to do it -- a Sleiman presidency does not have to equate with a victory for Hizballah and Syria at March 14 and U.S. expense.

**¶3.** (S) In our view, if Sleiman is elected, we need to consider (a) the public relations aspects, (b) how to strengthen the part of Sleiman that supported March 14 goals while marginalizing the bad aspects, and (c) how to prevent a collapse of the morale and unity of the March 14 movement. The more steadfast (some would say radical) members of March 14 are likely to be deeply disillusioned by their leaders' support of another military officer for president (and Saad Hariri has been particularly imperious and insensitive in moving ahead behind Sleiman while ignoring rank-and-file

March 14 members). In the tiresome Lebanese tradition of looking for solutions in, and passing blame onto, the outside world, we will undoubtedly -- if unfairly -- be held responsible for the "betrayal" or "abandonment" of March 14 that led to the Sleiman presidency. We can work now to make the Sleiman presidency far better than the doomsayers predict.

#### PUBLIC RELATIONS

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**¶4.** (S) In terms of public relations, a Sleiman victory will be trumpeted by some journalists and politicians -- locally, regionally, and internationally -- as a victory for Syria over the United States, and as a defeat for March 14. A persuasive case, while inaccurate in its oversimplification, is not hard to make, along the following lines: after backing UNSCR 1559 that opposed a constitutional amendment (and certain March 14 leaders were killed or wounded as a result), we now accept a constitutional amendment. We accept as civilian president a military officer who came to prominence because of Syrian appointments and who indulged Hizballah for years (and probably continues to do so). Sleiman's shockingly bad public utterances until recently serve as a gold mine for those looking for material with which to embarrass us and March 14 about the choice. No doubt, conspiracy theorists will link a Sleiman presidency to alleged U.S.-Syrian complicity.

**¶5.** (C) We recommend that we craft our media answers around the basic premise that we have always said we would support the president elected by a democratic majority. Our overall theme, we believe, should be that Sleiman was a Lebanese choice, and we therefore respect it. A constitutional amendment decided upon freely by Lebanese MPs, including the March 14 bloc, is in no way similar to the 2004 Lahoud

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extension amendment imposed under Syrian threats. We recommend making reference to the fact that we have full confidence in Lebanon's Members of Parliament and are certain that they would elect someone committed to Lebanon's democracy, unity, independence, and sovereignty, and to the implementation of international resolutions regarding Lebanon. The Lebanese people have made their support for these concepts known, and we are certain that the new president will respect the wishes of the Lebanese people. To combat the inevitable conspiracy theories, we should also make clear that we made no deal with Syria at Lebanon's expense, at Annapolis or elsewhere.

**¶6.** (C) In terms of our own views, we can emphasize the positive in noting our respect for Sleiman's brave decisions to permit the spring 2005 "Cedar Revolution" demonstrations to take place, to deploy the LAF to south Lebanon in accord with UNSCR 1701, and to pursue to the end, despite Hizballah's warnings not to enter Nahr al-Barid camp, the fight against Fatah al-Islam terrorists. Sleiman, we can note, deserves great credit for keeping the army united during a very difficult and divisive period of Lebanese history over the past three years. Indeed, the LAF, almost alone among Lebanon's public institutions, remains nearly universally respected, which is quite an accomplishment for which Sleiman can be given credit.

#### PUBLICLY EMBRACING SLEIMAN

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**¶7.** (S) If Sleiman is elected, we recommend giving him the benefit of the doubt and extending as warm an embrace -- from us, the EU, the Vatican, moderate Arabs, etc. -- as Sleiman will accept. Such a bear hug would be designed to help accomplish three goals:

-- Shrink Michel Aoun to permanent irrelevance, where he becomes a mere nuisance rather than a seriously destabilizing

factor, as he is now. A western embrace of Sleiman will shift much of Aoun's popular support to Sleiman almost immediately, we believe, leaving only the embittered hard-core "Aoun cult" insiders yelping from the outside. It will be much harder for Hizballah to claim "national" cover if Aoun's support is palpably diminished.

-- Throw Hizballah and the other pro-Syrians off balance. If the United States, moderate Arabs, and the EU are ostensibly so thrilled with Sleiman, then Hizballah and the pro-Syrians will wonder about whether they can really count on Sleiman's continued indulgence of their activities. Whereas Syria may see March 14 as having fallen into a clever trap to elect Sleiman, perhaps we can project the impression that it is the pro-Syrians who were tricked by a Sleiman presidency. (We don't suggest publicly embracing him now, which would simply provoke March 8 forces into raising their price for his election. We should maintain a public posture of strict neutrality until he is elected.)

-- Show Sleiman that the success of his presidency rests on the strength of his relations with the U.S., France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, etc. -- rather than on the strength of his relations with Syria and Iran.

¶8. (S) To show this embrace of Sleiman, we can consider several tools. First, we understand that the Harry S Truman carrier group is nearby. Perhaps we could have some kind of ship visit (taking into account all force protection concerns), shuttling Lebanon's new head of state to a representational event on board. A high-level envoy could visit Sleiman early in his tenure, inviting him to Washington. (Defense Minister Elias Murr claims to have told Sleiman that his first overseas trip as president should be to Washington; we would guess Sleiman would pick an Arab capital instead.) Certainly we should send the kind of congratulatory message to Sleiman that would, when published, demonstrate the support that Sleiman can expect from us, as long as he demonstrates commitment to Lebanon's democracy, independence, unity, etc.

¶9. (S) Privately, we are already demonstrating a mild embrace of Sleiman. If his presidency is inevitable -- and it's the most likely game in town to succeed right now -- we want him to see us as having played a helpful role in

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building the momentum that got him elected. Our interventions with political leaders and MPs, suggesting that they get together now behind a candidate and push rapidly ahead, is being played back to him as tacit support for his candidacy. While we never had any kind of formal veto we could impose on his candidacy, Sleiman was under the impression that was so. Sources linked to Sleiman leaked to an-Nahar that we had lifted the (non-existent) veto, and Sleiman told the Ambassador by phone today that he was satisfied with our position. This is exactly the right posture: Sleiman sees us as being helpful to a solution that may lead to him, but we are not publicly out in front in ways that would embarrass us if Sleiman's candidacy collapses or if Sleiman subsequently proves disastrous.

STRONG MESSAGE TO SLEIMAN

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¶10. (S) Privately, upon his election, we recommend sending Sleiman a strong message that pledges our support but also outlines our expectations. While these need to be realistic -- Sleiman as president will not be able to order the LAF to disarm forcibly Hizballah tomorrow -- they need to help lock Sleiman into a commitment on the international resolutions. Our private message should contain a lot of carrots as well as implied sticks. As someone simultaneously proud and insecure, Sleiman will bristle at foreign "dictats," but we recommend being polite but explicitly clear in our expectations. Locally, we are already previewing with him

what our likely relationship with a new president would be, and how it would be affected by the actions and statements of a new president. We believe that Sleiman is very aware of the positions we would want him to adopt, so a tough message should not surprise him.

#### UNIFYING INTERNATIONAL POSITION

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**¶11.** (S) We should not delude ourselves that the battle for the core principles of March 14 is either lost or won only with Sleiman's election. The start of a new presidential term triggers the constitutional collapse of the Siniora cabinet, with the selection of a prime minister, nomination of a cabinet, draft of a cabinet program, parliamentary vote of confidence for the new cabinet and program to follow, and appointment of key military and security leaders. All of these steps could either consolidate or erode March 14 power.

Since Sleiman is untested and probably a "halfway" president between March 8 and March 14 (or a "March 11" figure, as political wags have joked), we consider it vital that March 14 be united and with as strong a position into the cabinet as possible.

**¶12.** (S) We need to be engaged actively at every step of this process: we expect, for example, that the pro-Syrians will attempt to have the cabinet be composed proportionally according to parliamentary representation (55 percent March 14, 45 percent March 8-Aoun), which would give the pro-Syrian minority the influence to thwart virtually all cabinet action through the threat of resignation. This, after all, was a demand of Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah in his 11/11 speech, which give us a hint of battles to come. We also expect that the pro-Syrians will attempt to insert into the cabinet document language ensuring the "right" of Hizballah to maintain or even increase its deadly arsenal and use it as it wishes. We need a strong, unified, international position to box in Sleiman -- as well as the new prime minister (whom at this point is likely to be the untested and prone-to-deal-making Saad Hariri, notwithstanding Saudi hesitations).

**¶13.** (S) As the failed French initiative demonstrated, our European and Arab allies proved to be particularly weak-willed when it came to the majority's right to elect a president: they all blinked in the face of the fear-mongering by Hizballah and Aoun. Since a Sleiman presidency will not be a March 14 presidency, we recommend consultations now with the Egyptians, Saudis, French, EU, and Vatican on lining up support for a cabinet that leaves the clear majority in March 14 hands. While the siren call for a "national unity" cabinet may be as irresistible to our international partners as the "consensus" president was, we should be able to least to rally them around the inclusion of

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#### REVIVING MARCH 14 SPIRITS

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**¶14.** (S) March 14 rank and file members are going to feel bruised by two factors: the Sleiman presidency (if it happens) and the process, which left even prominent members of the bloc (including the two official candidates, Nassib Lahoud and Boutros Harb) in the dark. We will be accused of having "again" abandoned Lebanon to Syria. March 14 unity and motivation, however, need to be maintained for what will be a difficult period ahead. In our rush to embrace Sleiman and then the new PM, we should also find ways to promote the viability of March 14 as a political movement. We can use official visitors to meet with March 14 MPs, for example. And it is probably time to extend an invitation to Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea to Washington, since Geagea is the March 14 leader with the most to lose under a Sleiman presidency. (Despite Geagea's bloody past, it is worth remembering that he did spent 11 years in prison and was the beneficiary of a parliamentary amnesty.)

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2009

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¶15. (S) We also recommend keeping our focus on a horizon a bit more distant. A Sleiman presidency with a cabinet and parliamentary majority firmly in March 14 hands is probably something, while not ideal, that is manageable. Maybe, with the right incentives and messages as noted above, Sleiman starts leaning more toward March 14. Certainly, having a presidency and a cabinet should revive the effectiveness of the constitutional institutions. But time is of the essence:

Lebanon faces legislative elections in 2009, and there may be pressure (as there already is from Aoun and Hizballah) to move those elections forward. If the March 14 bloc loses its majority in 2009 or splits beforehand, then Sleiman will not have as many constraints on whatever pro-Syria leanings he has. Once a cabinet is in place, we recommend doing whatever we can to help see that the cabinet succeeds in ways that will give March 14 popular appeal in 2009.

FELTMAN